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RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 1721
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SUBJECT: ELECTION FORUM BRINGS TASTE OF DEMOCRACY TO BURMA

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11. (SBU) SUMMARY: Over 100 Burmese students, journalists and businesspeople gathered at the Embassy's American Center on February 6 to watch live results of the Super Tuesday primary elections and participate in a lively discussion about foreign policy and democratic values. Embassy officers and American Center teachers led the discussions. The participants contrasted Burma's lack of political freedom with the openness of the U.S. electoral process. Burmese students also participated in a straw poll, enabling them to experience their own measure of the democratic process. END SUMMARY.

12. (U) The American Center in Rangoon hosted a Super Tuesday discussion session on February 6, exposing Burmese youth to the concept of voting for national leaders, an experience few know for themselves. An audience of 100, mostly Burmese students, attended the program, which offered live CNN coverage of Super Tuesday primary election results at the American Center. U.S. Embassy officers and American Center teachers led small group discussion and break-out sessions, elaborating on the election process.

Reacting to Election Clips

13. (SBU) Scenes of crowded polling stations and jubilant expressions from supporters of the various candidates in America contrasted starkly against a background of acute oppression and continuing political arrests in Burma. Audience reactions ranged from fascination to astonishment at America's openness. One young Burmese student asked, "You can debate in the United States?" Others expressed disbelief that television commentators and political analysts spoke their minds without fear of punishment. A group of students from a beginner's English class were baffled at the lack of any authority dictating which party should lead the country.

Learning about Democratic Politics

14. (U) This was the first exposure to American politics for many participants and for a few, it was the first introduction to the reality of democracy and voting. Audience members asked about basic U.S. election procedures, the differences between candidates' positions and party policies, and election dynamics. While most participants understood how parties worked in principle, some lacked any understanding of the way that the Republican and Democrat party elect convention delegates. When one participant asked what the difference was between Democrats and Republicans, emboffs explained how different parties represent different interests and policies. Americans have the right to vote for the candidate most in line with their personal preferences and values, they emphasized. In response to a question, one emboff explained to a group of participants that he would not lose his job or face reprisals if the White House or Congress changed hands.

15. (SBU) A handful of participants displayed deeper knowledge about American politics. One woman attendee wanted to know why a state's political party might choose to have a winner-take-all allocation of delegates, instead of splitting them among candidates. Other questions focused on specific topics such as differences between the candidates over the Iraq war, other foreign policy issues, and economic policies. In response to a question about which candidate would take the strongest stance on Burma, an emboff noted that the U.S. Congress voted almost unanimously for current measures, and that both parties fully support the struggle for greater democracy in the country. While the event was a serious effort to promote democratic values, it was not without humor. The audience laughed when they noticed that American political parties have "national conventions," the same name as the meeting of Burmese junta-appointed delegates that rubber-stamped the military's sham

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"roadmap to democracy."

Experiencing Democracy through Voting

16. (U) Participants also had the opportunity to experience the democratic process firsthand. Early in the program, candidates were asked to vote for their preferred Democratic and Republican candidates. On the Republican side, John McCain won about two-thirds of the vote. The results on the Democratic side closely set the scene for the actual results of Super Tuesday, with Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama finishing in a dead heat. The program was scheduled to end at 10:30 a.m., but participants continued to ask questions about American politics. In the spirit of democracy, the participants were offered another chance to vote, with the option of extending the program by 90 minutes. Reflecting the Burmese population's hunger for open politics, the result was a resounding "yes."

Comment

17. (SBU) This event further displays a keen interest in politics amongst Burmese citizens and a desire to have their own political voice. The participants' lack of knowledge about the political process shows the need for continued awareness-raising. This kind of outreach is at the heart of the American Center's mission. While the regime suspects the American Center of intervening in Burmese politics, discussions of U.S. politics does not cause as much concern. Thus we can indirectly raise the political awareness of the Burmese. We will continue to work closely with the people of Burma, educating them on the importance and mechanics of democracy and the value of free and fair elections.

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